*Radical Periodicals In The United States*
*1890-1960*

# RADICAL PERIODICALS IN THE UNITED STATES, 1890-1960

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## VOLUMES 1-2

## *1916-1917*

*With an Introduction by*

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*Introduction*

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# Introduction

Almost to a man eulogists of success and victims of a professional obsession with power, historians have ignored the editor and publisher of the *Blast*. It is a shame. True, he did not ram a canal through an isthmus or wage a war to make the world safe, but for all that he was a remarkable and, in some ways, more admirable figure than those who did.

Alexander Berkman was a rebel from a very early age. Born in Vilna, Russia, in 1870 or 1871, he commenced school in St. Petersburg after his prosperous Jewish father had moved his business to the capital. The virtual civil war within Russian society was as close and as fascinating as the streets outside. One day when he was eleven, for example, his recitation of his geography lesson was interrupted by explosions nearby. The Czar, the excited students soon learned, had been assassinted. The youth went to bed that night enchanted by the words: "Will of the People—tyrant removed—Free Russia. . . . "And his notes for a projected autobiography, which unfortunately remained unwritten, show that he was already older than his years: "Visiting university students initiate me into Nihilism. Secret associations and forbidden books."

Small, dark, and intense, Berkman ever after cultivated a taste for forbidden books, forbidden ideas, forbidden ideals. His *Gymnasium* teachers considered him one of their best students but impossibly defiant. They finally expelled him for an essay entitled, "There Is No God." Then, threatened with a "wolf's passport" which would have closed every profession to him, he decided to immigrate to America. Taking steerage passage from Hamburg, he landed in New York in February, 1888.

Just four months earlier the men convicted of the Haymarket Bombing had been judicially murdered in Chicago. Berkman almost immediately interested himself in the case: "My vision of America as the land of freedom and promise," he later wrote a friend, "soon became dead ashes." He became an anarchist and follower of the ideas of Peter Kropotkin. Labor strife in Homestead, Pennsylvania, in 1892, moved Berkman to fury. When the force of Pinkerton guards killed ten workers, Berkman resolved to retaliate by assassinating Henry Clay Frick, Chairman of Carnegie Steel and employer of the Pinkertons. Though Berkman made a very serious effort to carry through his plan, his intended victim escaped with minor wounds.

Whatever his intentions, Berkman's act was ill-conceived. After his recovery Frick became even more adamantly anti-union. Ironically, the workers misinterpreted Berkman's motives, some assuming he and Frick had had a business misunderstanding and others suspecting him of acting as Frick's secret agent to gain sympathy for the steel baron. On the other hand, the act did prove the authenticity of his belief in his ideals. Moreover, he showed that he was willing to meet the dilemma of violence and counter-violence by sacrificing his own life for the life he attempted to take—as William Marion Reedy once remarked with insight, "Berkman sought not so much to sacrifice Frick as to sacrifice Berkman." Still, the act was in many ways disastrous and its real folly flowed from Berkman's assumption that the just life could be promoted by killing.

Berkman spent the next fourteen years in prison. Four years after his release, he published the *Prison Memoirs of an Anarchist* (1912), a searching, well-written inquiry into the psychology of men behind bars. Crowded years followed as editor of Emma Goldman's monthly, *Mother Earth*—in which position he showed himself to be mercifully free of most of the revolutionary cliches which hounded other radicals —as one of the founders and first instructors in the Francisco Ferrer Modern School, as organizer of the unemployed in 1912, and as agitator-at-large for such causes as the Lawrence strike and against such outrages as the Ludlow massacre.

Late in 1915, Berkman went out to California to see if he could help with the cases of Matthew Schmidt and David Caplan, friends who had recently been jailed for their alleged part, along with the McNamara brothers, in the dynamiting, a half-decade earlier, of the Los Angeles Times Building. "Neither of the men was in favor of my idea that ONLY a country-wide campaign of agitation would save them," he

wrote a friend. "They wanted to pussyfoot things, and I even had a very hot argument about it with Matt's sister. . . . [Anton] Johannsen and the whole 'radical' labor bunch was [sic] against me." Though Berkman had planned to establish a radical labor weekly in the South, he yielded to Schmidt's pleas that he carry on his work elsewhere.

Berkman was thus publishing and editing the *Blast* in San Francisco when a terrible event occurred during a preparedness parade. On 22 July 1916, a bomb explosion killed eight paraders and bystanders on the spot and wounded forty more. Berkman soon had occasion to mount his country-wide campaign of agitation.

Detective Martin Swanson, retained by local capitalists interested in public utilities, helped pin the crime on Thomas J. Mooney, regarded by his employers as a "troublesome factor" in labor disputes, and on Warren Billings, a young and rather distant associate of Mooney. District Attorney Charles Fickert, who had refused to prosecute graft charges against the president of United Railways, jumped at the chance of prosecuting Mooney, the enemy of United Railways. Mooney and Billings were arrested, without warrants, on 26 July, two days after a "Law and Order Committee" raised $400,000 to rid the community of "anarchist elements." Like a boom town, the frame-up was thrown together with suprising rapidity.

To make matters worse, liberals, trade unionists, and radicals in the Bay Area assumed from the beginning that Mooney and Billings were guilty. Even the libertarian Fremont Older, editor of the San Francisco *Bulletin,* stood back and expressed the feeling of the general public toward Mooney: "Let the son of a bitch hang."

Berkman and M. Eleanor Fitzgerald, his lovely, red-maned "associate worker," along with a few of their friends, were virtually alone in their conviction that Mooney and Billings were innocent. As a start, Berkman fought in the columns of the *Blast* against the unthinking and spineless acceptance of the Swanson and Fickert charges. He prevailed upon his friend Robert Minor, the gifted cartoonist and journalist, to take up the cause of the arrested men. He organized the first of the Mooney-Billings defense committees, with Emma Goldman, his great comrade, Fitzgerald, and Minor as fellow members. After some weeks of frustrating effort, the Committee finally struck a spark of interest in Western radical and labor circles. Fremont Older was one of the first to admit he had been wrong—in 1931 he wrote Emma Goldman that he had been "doing amends" for his initial response for fifteen years—and to throw his weight behind the campaign for the accused men.

Meanwhile, Emma Goldman had failed to persuade Frank P. Walsh, the nationally famous attorney, to take the case for the defense. Intent upon securing a competent lawyer, Berkman traveled across the country, interesting unions in the case on his way. In New York he sought out the highly paid and well-known figure, W. Bourke Cockran. The latter was so impressed by Berkman's eloquent description of the conspiracy against Mooney that he offered to take the case without pay. While in the East, Berkman also managed to rouse the interest and support of radicals and Jewish labor unions.

Berkman had almost single-handedly set in motion the nation-wide campaign he had talked about earlier. Years later, when Mooney's defense had been taken over by the Communists, Berkman's extraordinary achievement was deliberately ignored in historical presentations of the case. But this much was beyond dispute: Thanks primarily to Berkman, Mooney had a competent attorney, some funds, and considerable left-wing support. And this was of crucial importance "in those early days," as Mooney later gratefully wrote Berkman, "when the going was tough."

All this, alas, was not enough. Mooney was sentenced to hang and Billings was sentenced to life imprisonment.

Berkman had known all along that he ran great personal risk in his work for the two men. Swanson and Fickert had threatened to hang him along with Mooney. Now with the latter out of the way, action could be taken against "the real power behind the defense," as Fickert described Berkman. With absolutely no real evidence to go on, the District Attorney secured a grand jury indictment of Berkman for murder. But by this time, fortunately, the latter was in New York's Tombs, awaiting an appeal of his

and Emma Goldman's conviction for conspiring against military registration. The national government's interest, labor and radical protests against his proposed extradition, and the fundamental weakness of the case against him—all contributed to deny Fickert the pleasure of hanging him. Although the dangers Berkman braved to support Mooney were given an unmistakable demonstration, he continued the fight from his jail cell.

Russian workers in Petrograd and sailors in Kronstadt took up the campaign and gave it international dimensions. Ambassador Francis was mystified by the crowds outside the American Embassy in Petrograd chanting "Muni! Muni!" until he was informed that they were protesting the conviction of Mooney in California, half a world away. Such demonstrations, which occurred a number of times in 1917 and early 1918, were answers to messages sent to Russia by Berkman and his co-workers. Thus when Fickert tried to extradite Berkman, Emma Goldman and the Committee sent off a cable to Russian sympathizers: "Uncle is sick of the same disease as Tom. Tell friends." The cable slipped by the censors and the demonstrators chanted Berkman's name as well as Mooney's.

President Wilson learned of the protests, of course, through Ambassador Francis. To make sure he felt their full weight, Berkman arranged to have a radical friend go to Washington. Soon Wilson's favorite papers were peppered with news items on the Russian agitation; government officials were personally informed of happenings on the Coast. This publicity campaign was just well-started when Wilson announced the appointment of a mediation committee that was to conduct a thorough investigation.

After the investigation Wilson asked Governor Stephens of California to commute Mooney's sentence. Stephens took no action. The Kronstadt sailors again demonstrated and Ambassador Francis reportedly promised to work for the release of the imprisoned men. Then Wilson again wired Stephens that he hoped Mooney's sentence would be commuted, for it would have a "heartfelt effect upon certain international affairs." After further intercessions from the White House, and after a second federal investigation turned up further grave irregularities in Fickert's conduct of the case, Governor Stephens complied with Wilson's repeated requests. Reluctantly, protestingly, Stephens signed the commutation of Mooney's sentence, angrily charging that "the propaganda in his behalf following the plan outlined by Berkman has been so effective as to become world-wide."

Official cowardice and cruelty were to keep Mooney behind bars for more than two decades, but Berkman's campaign had helped save his life.

The pages of the *Blast* seem to smell of black powder or, better, seem to have blown out of the eye of a social hurricane. A sense of absolute emergency pervades almost every column. Unlike some other radical periodicals, this was not mere pose, propped up by a pseudo-desperate barricade rhetoric. Real people were being locked up and sentenced to death. Each issue of the *Blast* threatened to be the last. After it had most improbably reached its first birthday, the editor looked back at all the crises, hurries, and harrassments with some surprises himself! They had overcome "chicken-hearted printers, fearful of what their respectable customers would say; sly underhand wire-pulling by grafters, high and low; bitter opposition by Mother Grundies in silk skirts and overalls; stupid censorship and arbitrary deprivation of second-class rights; police-terrorized newsdealers, open persecution and hidden malice. . . . " Part of their compensation was in knowing the *Blast* had been "a sharp thorn in the law and order reactionists."

Here and there, apart from all this high seriousness, you will run across traces of conscious and unconscious humor. No doubt an example of the latter was an item on a 4th of July picnic, sponsored by the *Blast,* at which "we gave away the premium of Nietzsche's Complete Works, which was 'gathered in' by No. 1775A, held by E. Barabino, a young Italian comrade of Oakland. . . . "

Students of recent history will find this reprinting useful. Published for less than a year and a half, the *Blast* still gives the careful reader insights into the causes and

fights of the political far left. It remains the best contemporary source on the early phases of the Mooney case. For those interested in Wilsonian liberalism in the pre-war months, it contains interesting material on the suppression of *Regeneracion,* a Spanish-language weekly published in Los Angeles, and the imprisonment of its editors, Ricardo and Enrique Flores Magon. Their case, along with others, raised the question of the authenticity of Wilson's liberalism long before all the acts of suppression could be blamed on Attorney General Palmer. Moreover, the Magon case was of significance in its own right, for the brothers were, from all unofficial accounts, man of rare idealism and courage who undertook this early to organized the Mexican Americans—a task that remains unfinished today, as the recent strikes of Cesar Chavez and his Farm Workers Union show. Social historians will be interested in the accounts of the arrests of Emma Goldman and Margaret Sanger, when the latter was still a radical, for their birth control agitation. Students of the graphic arts will be interested in the trenchant social commentary of Robert Minor's cartoons.

Since the *Blast* was first and last a venture in personal journalism, an afterword on its editor is in order. Berkman spent the war years in the federal prison at Atlanta and, in late 1919, along with some 200 other rejects from the American dream, was deported to Russia. He was welcomed with open arms by the revolutionists and was soon enthusiastically at work helping build a new society. From the first, however, he was critical of the economic inequities perpetuated by Lenin and his followers and increasingly disturbed by the systematic terror. After the slaughter of the Kronstadt sailors in March, 1921, Berkman and Emma Goldman left Russia in dismay, convinced that the Communists were intent on "rearing generations of slaves" to the state apparatus.

In Berlin, where he lived for the next few years, Berkman served as secretary-treasurer of the Russian Political Prisoners' Relief Committee, collected most of the materials and affidavits for *Letters from Russian Prisons* (New York: Albert and Charles Boni, 1925), nominally edited by Roger Baldwin and still a valuable source on early Communist oppression, and wrote his own *Bolshevik Myth* (New York: Boni & Liveright, 1925), a discriminating attack on the emergent totalitarianism from a libertarian perspective.

Holding only a Nansen passport as a stateless person, Berkman moved to Paris in 1925, and finally settled in Nice where, save for several interruptions, he lived out the rest of his life. On three occasions in the early 1930's he was expelled from France and, while friends came to his rescue, he remained at the mercy of the authorities and the local gendarmes. Berkman eked out a poor and precarious existence with his writing and translating, and by giving his lifelong friend, Emma Goldman, assistance in writing her *Living My Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1931). But his last years hardly supported the contention of Communists that he was living grandly on the Riviera after having "betrayed" the Revolution. Unwilling to exist in complete dependence on the generosity of friends and suffering from a serious illness, Berkman shot himself to death in June, 1936.

Berkman died on the eve of the Spanish Civil War and revolution, which in a sense really marked the beginning of our times, but a statement suitable for an epitaph was written in the 1920's by Eugene O'Neill. "As for my fame (God help us!), and your infame," O'Neill wrote Berkman, "I would be willing to exchange a good deal of mine for a bit of yours. It is not so hard to write what one feels as truth. It is damned hard to live it."

—Richard Drinnon
Lewisburg, Pa., 1968